

The Horse Pasture

Era: early 1990s

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I craned my neck so I could look over the sea of faces in the Forest Grove Community Centre. Some people smiled from their chairs, others looked grim, their foreheads puckered and their chins jutting forward determinedly.

Jutting chins reminded me of witches and that reminded me of the poster announcing the meeting. The poster pictured an angel and a chef, jointly stirring a boiling cauldron of automobiles. Angels aren't connected with witches in anybody else's mind. But for me, the angel was wearing a dunce cap, along with her wings - and that made her look like she needed a broom and a black cat to go along with her boiling cauldron. From what Betty said, the developer was supposed to be the chef who was cooking up the new shopping mall, and the angel was a guardian looking after the interests of the people.

"Lots of people," I said to my friend Betty, who had been working on the traffic committee and who had drawn the poster. I didn't live in Forest Grove but had decided to come with Betty to offer moral support.

The head table was almost full, a deadly array of politicians, city officials, community representatives, and most importantly, 'the developer'. Except for the alderman they were all male. They all sat in their chairs, stiff-backed, staid and formal, almost bored.

"I took a pain killer just before I came," Betty informed me. With good reason, I thought. The evening promised to be deadly.

At exactly five minutes after the hour, a man in the centre of the head table stood up, cleared his throat and waited for the audience to fall silent.

"I'd like to call this meeting to order," he stated, his small head bobbing pleasantly. "We're here tonight to discuss a new proposal for the piece of property located at the corner of North Haven Drive and Lantern Avenue."

Several people in the audience murmured. "... save the horse pasture."

"The first thing I'd like to do is introduce the people at the head table. My name is Ray Nickright, and I'm in charge of the Forest Grove Community Committee, set up to investigate the desirability of this new Shopping Plaza. During the course of the evening you'll be hearing a presentation by the developer, Happy O'Garry..." Mr. O'Garry stood to the sound of restrained clapping "... and from your Alderman Geraldine Sway." Ms. Sway swept graciously to her feet midst a swirl of cape.

A piercing voice broke through the clapping that followed Alderman Sway's gesture of welcome. "Are we allowed to ask questions whenever we feel the need or is this one of these meetings where the community is supposed to shut up?" A tall slender man with dark hair and an aquiline nose was standing close to the back of the room.

"Ah, yes, Jake. This is your busy season. I was thinking you'd be out selling real estate tonight and wouldn't be able to make it to the meeting," Ray responded, then sighed. "We'll try to entertain questions, folks, when you feel the need to ask them but if we get so many that we're having trouble making it through the presentation we'll have to cut them off."

"Good. I have a question right now."

"Go ahead."

"If this is a shopping centre, I want to know if there's going to be a hardware store in it. I get tired of walking all the way over to Canadian Tire every time I want to do some gardening or put a new washer in my tap."

"Whoa, Jake. You're way ahead of us there. We'll have to wait until we've heard the developer's presentation. Maybe we should get on with that right away. Alderman Sway, is there anything you would like to say before Mr. O'Garry makes his presentation?"

"Yes, I just wanted to say how perfectly lovely it is to see you all out today and to comment on what a wonderful job your community association and your traffic committee have been doing. I've been actively involved with them for the past year and want you all to know what a wonderful group of people they are."

Betty poked me. "Oh wow, Lois. You know, I've never even seen her at a traffic meeting," she giggled.

"I also want you to know," Alderman Sway continued, "I've left orders with my staff that I should be awakened any time I'm needed - day or night -even if I'm in a council meeting."

"Thank-you Alderman Sway, and now we would like to call on Mr. O'Garry," the beaming Ray announced.

Happy O'Garry stood, pressed the lapel of his suit jacket flat and walked around to the front of the table so he could enter into more intimate communication with the audience.

"We have a really nice proposal for you tonight. It contains all the best features of the last proposal and some unique features that will make it absolutely irresistible to you."

He pulled out an architect's rendering of a facade of buildings, drawn in the latest style, with peaks and false fronts, red brick and blue siding.

"As you can see, it has been imagined with the very finest of materials and the lushest landscaping. We definitely had Martha in mind when we planned it. Martha is here tonight, isn't she?"

There was a tittering from the audience, then a voice sprang back. "I'm here. But I'll hear you out before I tell you it's no good."

Betty leaned over and whispered into my left ear. "She lives right across the street from the development - on Norway Road."

I nodded and took a good look. The woman was cuddling a dog that was drowning in hair and looked like it had been crushed with affection.

"The place looks like a barn," Jake commented. "We're into horses in this community but we prefer to keep them in pastures."

O'Garry smiled tactfully. "You sell real estate, don't you Jake? See me after the meeting. I have some relatives that are moving here."

"Oh sure," Jake said. "Here's my card." He rushed to the front of the room, handed O'Garry a business card, then returned to the wall he was supporting.

O'Garry continued, "The development consists of a strip mall instead of the three towers which the community has repeatedly rejected. In deference to the community, and to Martha, our new development has no entrances or exits into the site from Norway Road."

"He isn't really doing us a favor," Betty supplied. "The city told him he couldn't have any exits or entrances onto Norway Road if he was building a mall."

O'Garry shifted the rendering awkwardly from hand to hand. "You'll notice we have extra parking above and beyond the city guidelines." The rendering was cramping his sense of intimacy with the audience so he propped it against his briefcase on the head table and blocked Alderman Sway from the audience's view.

"How many stalls are you required to provide?" Jake asked.

"187."

"And how many are you supplying?"

"Quite a few more than that - 190, I believe."

Betty poked me. "He still hasn't told us where the 50 or so employees are supposed to park."

"I would like to ask Alderman Sway a question." It was Martha, the woman who lived on Norway Road with her crushed, short-legged dog. Alderman Sway stood from behind the brief case and moved to the left of O'Garry.

Happy O'Garry seemed graciously annoyed about giving up his control. "Go ahead," he suggested and surrendered the floor to Alderman Sway by stepping in front of her again.

"I've decided I don't like this proposal," Martha stated. "I'd rather look at horses than those pointy things. Why can't we just leave the site the way it is? It's been a perfectly good pasture for fifteen years."

"Yes, it has been, hasn't it. A good educational experience for our children," Alderman Sway agreed.

"Yeh, the school board should subsidize the property. They could pay for tours for the kids. They pay for kids to go roller skating and skiing all the time. I don't see any difference," Martha suggested.

"Yeh, the kids need to learn about the environment," Jake added. "This would be ideal. They could collect horse droppings and take them to school to study under the microscope."

"I'm sure neither the owner nor the developer will be very happy if we insist they can't build something. Both of them have invested a lot of resources in this piece of land. Sooner or later they have to get their money out of it. Besides, the land is right in the middle of the city so it's not really suitable for horses any more.

"Then we want a park," Martha insisted.

"Parks are very expensive."

"The city can pay for the property. We want a park."

"The land isn't really suitable for a park," Ray Nickright interrupted. "Also, the SPCA has threatened to charge Mr. Kilgour with Cruelty to Animals..."

Betty leaned closer, "Kilgour owns the land," she told me. "He hired O'Garry to develop it for him."

".. because the exhaust fumes from the local traffic are ruining the health of his horses. And the noise is hard on their hearing. We can't ask the tax payers to sponsor a park at the intersection of two such busy streets. Mr. O'Garry, would you please continue."

Betty leaned toward me again. "The Kilgour family has a policy that once they own a piece of land, they never sell it."

That might make the family very wealthy within a couple of generations I decided, and considered giving 'my' business card to O'Garry.

"Thank-you for your support Ray," O'Garry continued. "I have no doubt your community will see the desirability of our new proposal. If you folks don't like it, of course, the alternative is to go with the three eleven-story apartment buildings that were originally proposed for the site ten years ago."

"How come the site is safe for people but it's not safe for horses?" Martha asked.

"Horses have delicate constitutions," piped up a young woman that I had seen once before on the back of a horse during a show jumping event at Spruce Meadows.

"How does the traffic generated by the new proposal compare to the traffic generated by the three apartment buildings?" The question came from the real estate agent, Jake, who was still holding up the wall at the back of the room.

O'Garry was apparently prepared for this question. "The mall would generate 4000 trips a day, whereas the apartment buildings would generate only 2800. But Martha doesn't want three apartment buildings blocking the light on her side of the street and dozens of people looking down into her front yard."

"How do you know what I want?"

"You told me, Martha, at the last meeting."

"We don't want another mall, either." Jake's voice was forceful. "We already have nine malls within walking distance. I mean how many copies of Tip Top Tailors or Hallmark Cards do we really need?"

"Yeh, mall proliferation. We'd rather have a horse pasture." General murmurs from the crowd supported this observation.

"Nine malls within walking distance?" I turned to Betty. "Maybe I should move to Forest Grove."

"I thought you wanted a hardware store in the plaza?" O'Garry pointed at Jake. "We'll see what we can do." He turned to Martha. "We've been negotiating with a couple that wants to open a grooming parlor, as well."

"How about dress shops?" I called out.

"Oh, for sure. How could we have a mall without a dress shop? Mind you, we aren't making any promises. And you should remember you really don't want those three towers. But we might have to build them if you turn us down."

"Yeh. He keeps threatening us with those towers," Betty interjected in her stage whisper. "But multi-family dwellings are an economic write-off right now. He doesn't want to build them at all."

I stood up because I realized people were missing an important point. "I think if you're building this mall, you need lots of dress-shops," I told O'Garry. "I'm sure the other women in here would agree with me. It will just make the whole thing viable - draw people from all over the city."

"How about a beauty salon," someone else suggested.

"I think we need a martial arts store."

"Yeh and the people in the old folk's home need someplace to sit down for a cup of coffee."

"I think you should consider a couple of shoe stores as well," I added "and what about a milliner. Hats are back in fashion, aren't they? That could be a real drawing card."

"What about a flower shop? My son's girlfriend is graduating and he has to buy a corsage."

"Have you considered a funeral parlor? I'm thinking my mother in law is ready to kick off."

"I'm looking for a job."

"How about a zoo? They have one in that mall in Edmonton."

"Ray, do something," Jake yelled. "This meeting is in chaos."

"What's your expiration date?" I hollered at Jake, wishing he'd mind his own business.

There was a general murmur of approval from the audience and I was filled with a sense of satisfaction. The mall was on its way.

Betty pulled at my skirt and I sat down. "Lois, you don't even live here. The committee doesn't want to draw traffic from all over the city. That's the whole point."

"Hrrruuummmph," O'Garry bellowed to regain control of his audience. "I'm sure many of your requests will be satisfied. Now for the mall itself - as you can see, my architect has carefully ensured that these buildings match the very latest fashion in architectural design."

"Why does it have to have all those pointy things all over it?" Martha asked. "Couldn't we just have some nice smooth flowing lines?"

"That's not the fashion. And this will definitely be a fashionable mall. As you can see, the site consists of three buildings. One is a medical clinic combined with a restaurant ..."

"And I get to smell greasy food all day...," Jake, the real estate agent said.

"...which will be closed down by eleven o'clock at night as the residents have requested. This other building consists of a strip of stores. The third building is a bank. The whole site will be maintained on a regular basis with automatic sprinkling systems and paid gardeners - including the backs of the buildings that lie along Norway Road."

Martha's ears perked up when she heard 'Norway Road'. "What guarantee do we have that you'll look after the grass?" she asked.

"What guarantee do I have you'll look after the grass on your property?" O'Garry countered. "If you don't, the mess could have a detrimental effect on my property values."

"Okay, okay," Martha responded and crossed her legs the other way. Her crushed dog yelped briefly, then made himself comfortable again.

"As you can see, we have attempted to meet all the requirements of your community. This proposal will be appearing before the Calgary Planning Commission the day after tomorrow, and we would sincerely like the community's approval for our presentation."

"Why is this whole business so rushed," Jake asked. "Why isn't there any buffer time between our meeting and the CPC meeting?"

Ray Nickright stood up. "I'd like to answer that question if I could. But I think we should let Mr. O'Garry finish his presentation first."

"I believe I'm finished, Ray." O'Garry looked over his papers that were laid across the table, his back to the audience. "Yes that's it," He whirled toward the front again, "But if I think of anything else I need to say, I won't hesitate to interrupt."

"Thank-you Happy," Ray bowed very slightly. "To answer your question, Jake, this meeting was called at the earliest possible date it could be. Mr. O'Garry came through with his promised traffic study late in August, and since our Alderman was on holiday this was the earliest date we could possibly hold a meeting. Mr. O'Garry would like to get the proposal through CPC because he wants to start work on the development next month."

"Then I want to know why we only got the traffic study in August," Jake asked. "I saw a copy of it and it was dated June 1st."

"You'll have to ask Mr. O'Garry that, but perhaps you could do it at the end of the meeting."

Betty leaned toward me and whispered loudly, "O'Garry knows that everybody and his dog is on holidays during July and August. I'll bet that's why he didn't release it in June. He was as mad as heck when we managed to get the proposal delayed long enough to hold this meeting."

It was obvious to me that being a developer could kill you - if you did it right.

Ray coughed. "Right now we are going to hear a presentation from your community traffic committee. I'd like to call on Betty Hume."

"Oh my goodness," I looked at Betty. "You didn't tell me."

Betty scrambled to get past my knees. "I didn't want you to feel like you had to come," she responded.

As she approached the microphone, I noticed the badge she was wearing. It said, 'I heart horses'. Her eyes were rather wide as if she was in shock. "After studying this proposal for several days," Betty began her speech, "it is the considered opinion of your traffic committee that this development would be a bit of a disaster."

A low murmur rippled from mouth to mouth.

Betty stood a hardboard map of the site against a pillar in front of Alderman Sway. "As you can see the piece of property would have two accesses, one from Lantern Avenue and one from North Haven Drive. Because of the concrete medium in the middle of Lantern, 70 per cent of the traffic would have to access the site through the North Haven exit."

"What about Norway Road?" Martha asked. "How much of the traffic would be travelling down Norway Road?"

"We can't say for sure but Norway would probably be pushed to its environmental limit which is 1000 cars a day. Unfortunately, North Haven Drive is already at its environmental limit. That's 10,000 cars a day and this development would up the level to thirteen thousand."

"We don't want any more traffic on Norway Road," Martha stated. "We want the end of Norway blocked off."

"That would just push the extra traffic on Norway over onto Sweden Road," Betty suggested.

"If you're blocking Norway Road then we want Sweden Road blocked too," a voice from the back of the room cracked.

"A front street should be like sex," Martha explained. "Private."

"You realize any traffic that doesn't go down either Norway or Sweden will be forced onto North Haven which is already at the environmental limit."

"North Haven doesn't matter," Martha stated. "It's already a busy street. It's supposed to be busy."

"I own a house on North Haven," Jake stated, "and I think it matters. Send them down Norway."

"At any rate the most important point I want to make concerns this intersection on North Haven that will handle seventy per cent of the traffic in and out of the mall. I would like every body to realize there are two bus stops here, one right next to the entrance and another one across the street. If you consider westbound traffic on North Haven Drive, there will be periods of time when one of the two lanes will be filled with traffic trying to turn left into the mall and the other lane will be backed up because there will be a bus at the stop - right here."

"Did the developer's Traffic Report say anything about this intersection?" Jake asked.

"No," Betty conceded, "but I wouldn't have expected it to. Sort of buyer beware if you know what I mean."

"Yeh," Jake snorted. "And I'm supposed to sell houses on these streets. I say no. How about it everybody? Let's vote no."

"You bet'cha," Martha piped up. "We all say no."

Ray Nickright stood up and wrestled the microphone from Betty's fingers. "We will now call on Mr. Durmwist who is Mr. O'Garry's Traffic Engineer to comment on Ms. Hume's remarks."

Mr. Durmwist was imposing in his dignified grey suit and starched grey hair. "It is imperative," he boomed into the microphone, "that the residents of Forest Grove realize it is impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy what the traffic in this intersection will be like. Ms. Hume is entitled to her opinion but it is the belief of my company that the traffic on North Haven will flow easily around this bottleneck. Barring all else, cars can use the circular driveway at Saint Augustine's Church."

"I think its time we called a vote on this," Jake stated, "as long as Durmwist is finished. Let's get a move on, Ray. I want to propose that the community submit a letter to the Calgary Planning Commission that rejects this development proposal as it stands."

"What about the towers?" Martha asked.

"Yeh," Jake responded. "How about it, Alderman Sway? If we object to this proposal can O'Garry here go ahead and build the towers?"

Alderman Sway stood slowly, smiled in the limelight. "Any proposal has to go past city council before it can be built. There is no problem from that point of view, but you must remember the developer is going to have to put something on this piece of land. Please keep in mind, the owner is anxious to get on with this business. He's such a nice man, too," she added. "Really all he wants to do is leave a little inheritance for his grand children. He's not very healthy anymore."

I looked over at Betty who had covered her eyes and was shaking her head.

"I stand to be corrected," Ray interrupted the Alderman, "but I think everyone should be aware the three towers have zoning approval which the mall development does not. Therefore if Mr. O'Garry decided to go ahead with the towers he does not have to go back to city council to get zoning approval."

Alderman Sway's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Oh," she conceded and she blanched ever so slightly as she shrank back into her seat.

"Too bad the only people that know how to run the city are busy selling real estate and looking after their dogs," Jake mumbled.

"Let's have a vote then," Ray continued. "Would all those who want to approve this proposal, please put up their hands?"

No hands rose but I had a feeling they would have been chopped off if they had.

"Okay, all those who wish for the community to submit a letter to the Calgary Planning Commission stating they don't want to support this development, please put up their hands."

A sea of hands waved enthusiastically in the air.

Personally I felt it was unfortunate. A tenth mall would have been a real asset to Forest Grove. Paradise lost again.

"Well, that's it," Ray conceded. "The letter will be drafted and submitted tomorrow."

"I don't think that's good enough," Jake interrupted. "I want to address another question to Alderman Sway."

"Go ahead."

"Can us residents make a presentation at Calgary Planning Commission?"

"No," Alderman Sway stated, "but you can make a presentation when the proposal comes before city council about a month later. You can bring everybody that is here with you if you want. City council can turn down this proposal you know, even if Calgary Planning Commission does approve it."

"And when will this meeting be?"

"October 20th."

"What about you, Alderman Sway?" He emphasized her name, caressed it with his tongue. "Can we count on your support through this whole thing?"

"Of course, you can count on my support. You can count on me all the way, one hundred percent. I have the interests of my voters at heart and want you all to know I will defend you no matter what economic interests or social pressures are brought to bear on me."

"Ray," Jake continued, "I think we should get a petition together while we have everyone here. People don't want to leave any of this to chance."

From the bowels of the room someone yelled, "Can we push a button and get this meeting on fast-forward?"

"I've got the petition," Martha waved a clipboard from her seat in the audience. Her dog got fed up and jumped onto the floor. "Just sign your name folks. I've got three copies here." She shoved a copy into the hands of the person next to her and it started making the rounds.

"What does it say?" Ray asked.

"We, the residents of Forest Grove, having attended an information meeting on September 11th, have decided we do not support the proposal as submitted by Mr. O'Garry due to the traffic problems it will create in our neighborhood."

"Would anybody like to modify the statement?" No one responded.

"All those that approve raise their hands?"

Mass approval.

"Well, I think that takes care of everything," Ray said. "Stick around until you sign the petition, folks. Otherwise feel free to talk to your Alderman and anyone else at the head table. Meeting adjourned."

I rushed over to talk to Alderman Sway. I wanted to tell her how much I liked her cape, but I was too late. Happy O'Garry had already arrived at her side.

"I'm going to approach city hall about this meeting," he told her. "I won't stand for this kind of corruption. This meeting was stacked against me right from the beginning. I was even portrayed as a witch on the poster announcing the thing. Alderman Sway you are not doing your job. It's just disgusting how you let them railroad you. I demand a meeting with you tomorrow morning. I'll be in your office at nine o'clock."

"Yes, of course, Happy."

"A pack of lies... the whole thing is just a pack of lies. My traffic engineer knows none of this is the truth. I didn't get the chance to defend the proposal. This whole meeting was stacked against me."

I felt a little like I was eavesdropping so I headed toward the other side of the room where I found Betty talking to Ray Nickright about the presentation.

"Just about the right length."

"Certainly had the community on side."

"Alderman Sway pulled through."

"O'Garry might have to go back to the drawing board after all."

Fifteen minutes later, Alderman Sway sauntered over, her cape wafting gracefully with every move she made. "Ray," she murmured sweetly, "Don't you think you guys pushed this a little bit too hard? CPC can approve this proposal without your sanction, you know, and so can city council."

She blocked Betty and me from the conversation with her back.

"What do you mean?" Ray asked.

"Well, Happy is a little upset you know. He says he wants a copy of the poster for this meeting. He says the whole thing was stacked against him right from the beginning, that you guys even drew him as a witch. He says he's going to distribute copies of the poster to all the aldermen on council and write an official letter of complaint to the Calgary Planning Commission. I really can't support you folks in this, Ray, if this is how you're operating. It's not cricket. Making that poor man identify with the witch in the poster."

Betty closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. "But it isn't a witch – it's an angel, a guardian angel - and besides that, I drew the developer as the chef."

Personally, I was thinking maybe Alderman Sway's campaign funds were in danger. This could not be good for her since, like me, she obviously liked shopping. Her cape said it all.

"No one can do anything about it Betty," I told her. "The system protects idiots. I know because I've tested it."

"I guess you're right," she agreed, then stepped up beside Ray to defend her artwork.

I headed off to look for Jake, the real estate agent. Forest Grove was, without doubt, a shopping paradise and a new house sounded like a wonderful way to spend my money.



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